

UCT Graduation Talk – 16 December 2014

Honouring the Privilege of Higher Education through Socially Responsive Citizenship

Imam Dr. A. Rashied Omar

**Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Max Price;
Graduating Students and Faculty;
Ladies and Gentlemen:**

Good Morning, Molweni and Assalamu `Alaykum

Allow me first to congratulate all of the graduates present here today.

Your wonderful achievements that we are celebrating here today allow you, the graduate class of 2014, to become part of a very small and privileged segment of our society.

According to Census 2011 almost 9% of the South African population has had no schooling and only about 12% of the population has a tertiary qualification.

Today you are joining this 12% elite and privileged class of South Africans. What is this privilege that we are celebrating here today? It is a privilege that enabled you to engage in reading texts, listening to lectures, responding critically to ideas, formulating arguments and creatively producing your own novel hypotheses and theories, for which you are now being rewarded with a higher education qualification. A distinct privilege indeed.

It is fortuitous that your graduation day coincides with this Day of Reconciliation. It provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the social responsibilities that come with the privileges of a higher education qualification. I would like to suggest that the privilege of a higher education qualification should not just be about 'me, myself and I'. A conscientious graduate should be someone who avoids the alluring trap of individualism and becomes a socially conscious and responsive citizen.

During my student years at this university in the late seventies and early eighties, at the height of the anti-apartheid struggle, the struggle for social justice defined my student life and those of many others at the time. We fully recognized the privileges that higher education at this institution afforded us, and this motivated us to commit ourselves to the anti-apartheid struggle in the sincere hope that freedom from oppression and all forms of injustices would be achieved for all on our life-time. We were allowed to enroll at UCT, which at the time was designated for Whites, by signing a permit that indicated that the courses we were taking were not offered at UWC, which was designated for non-Whites. In my case, ironically, my UCT 'permit' course was African history. We entered UCT under protest and willingly made sacrifices such as refusing to participate in university sports and to attend graduation ceremonies because of our commitments to the struggle for social justice in Apartheid South Africa.

After 1994, the opportunities for social justice and transformation expanded, and yet 20 years later, it is clear that the commitment to the struggle for social justice has waned. My challenge to this graduate class of 2014 is to revivify this noble struggle for social justice.

While on this Day of Reconciliation we can celebrate many social, political and economic gains we have made since 1994, we also have to acknowledge that after 20 years of democratic rule, our society remains deeply divided. A significant proportion of our population remains poverty stricken; their job prospects remain limited; their employers continue to exploit them; they endure poor quality health and education services; they are dependent on often hazardous public transport systems and their communities are ravaged by drugs and gang violence.

It is commendable that this institution (UCT) offers many programmes that afford its students opportunities not only to reflect on the deep inequalities that persist in our society but also encourage its students to make a positive contribution towards building a more egalitarian society and to traverse the racial and class divides that remain so intractable in our city and in our country.

The challenge lies when you leave this institution and re-enter a world in which everyone competes for resources, in which the pursuit of individual success and prosperity trumps all other endeavours.

I would like to propose at least four ways in which you, the graduate class of 2014, can rise to the challenge of revivifying the selfless struggle for social justice. First, you could strengthen the leverage of civil society for social justice and transformation by becoming active members of community based organisations. Currently there is a growing social movement that seeks greater socio-economic justice and dignity for all South Africans and I encourage you to become an active participant in this movement.

Second, you could actively support solidarity campaigns for economic justice for marginalised and exploited workers. At this time, we are witnessing some significant re-alignment of power and ideological debates in the Trade Union movement which could have serious implications for the struggle for social justice.

Third, you could use your privileged positions in society to strengthen our 'Chapter 9 Institutions' enshrined in our Constitution. These institutions are a valuable bulwark to protect our democracy and struggles for social justice. The independence of these institutions is critical to prevent abuse of power and to hold government to account for their actions. Examples of these institutions include the Office of the Public Protector, the Auditor General and the Human Rights Commission.

Last but not least, there are also modest individual acts of compassion and benevolence which each one of you can engage in, which collectively can contribute immensely to social transformation and socio-economic justice in our country. By beginning with small acts of

charity we can gradually transform them into acts of solidarity in pursuit of socio-economic justice for all marginalised and impoverished communities in our country.

I place these proposals before you, the graduate class of 2014, on this joyous day of your graduation and reflective Day of Reconciliation, and invite you to honour the privilege of your higher education achievements by eschewing the alluring trap of individualism and embracing socially conscious and responsive citizenship.

At this celebratory time my wish and prayer is that we are not merely celebrating your privilege of acquiring a higher education qualification but that we are also celebrating a 2014 class of UCT graduates who are committed to making our beloved country and the world a better place for all.

Thank you for your patience.